

Operational (Action) Planning

The action planning steps presented here will help guide APHIS managers in planning strategically for emergency response programs and other APHIS initiatives requiring precise, comprehensive planning documents that effectively communicate critical information to administrators at the Department level and above. The action plan for an emergency or new program must convincingly convey the need and rationale for the desired course of action, a clear objective and clear milestones toward anticipated outcomes. These action planning steps can be used as a checklist to help ensure a unified commitment and course of action for emergency response and new program initiatives.

In an emergency situation, action planning using short time frames is often the most productive approach. Targets and milestones may need to be established on a weekly, daily or even hourly basis depending on the nature of the emergency. Greater urgency also makes straightforward and more immediate targets desirable. Because of the fluid nature and uncertainties characteristic of most emergencies, contingency or scenario variant planning is often more important than in other types of planning.

Once an action plan is completed and the results are evaluated, adjustments made through efficiency or refinement planning can alter program logic and functional processes to enhance efficiency and, if necessary, establish new targets and/or milestones.

Operational Planning in an Emergency

When an emergency occurs, there is little time for formal strategic planning. For the most part, activity needs to begin right away and people and equipment must be coordinated immediately. Operational planning should flow directly from the planning already completed by the Agency's leadership. That is, the activities and functions to be carried out to manage the emergency, should clearly fall within the purview of the organization's long-term goals and strategies. If, however, actions appear to be incongruent with these goals and strategies, the Agency leadership needs to agree to move forward and make

adjustments at a later time to their strategic documents or pass the emergency to another federal agency with clearer legislative authority to manage it.

The onset of an emergency is the signal for the action planning process to begin. A written action plan will set the needed course of action and serve as a "roadmap" for how the program will accomplish its long-term strategic goal. Action plans should be brief and concise but complete, and in terms easily understood by non-technical officials. Mid-level and field-level managers must be involved in the action planning process to ensure that these plans are technically feasible, effective and minimize negative impacts on the affected or regulated entities and cooperators.

Components of an Emergency Action Plan

A good action or emergency action plan will include sufficient information to answer anticipated questions from budget and policy makers who must approve the expenditure of resources identified by the plan. Empirical data are a necessary requisite of all action plans submitted for Departmental approval. Action plans must cite the most recent and best knowledge available as the basis for the action proposed by the plan. The components of a good emergency action plan should answer the following questions:

1. What is the status of the current emergency situation?
 - Describe the underlying need for action
 - Scope of the threat
2. What action should be taken? By who? By when?
 - May need to develop an administrative action plan and a technical action plan
 - What methods will be used and what is the plan objective? What alternative actions were considered and what is the rationale for selecting or rejecting an approach?

- What legislative authorities exist that authorize the organization's involvement?
 - What will be the different roles of all the involved players—industry, federal agencies, state agencies & researchers? Identify roles and responsibilities.
 - How will these different entities coordinate with one another?
3. What are the consequences if we take no action?
- Clearly identify the resources at risk (agricultural, human health, etc.)
 - Use empirical data to develop best and worst case scenarios about disease or pest spread and potential economic impact
 - How dynamic is the situation?
4. What special considerations exist?
- What are the political circumstances that influence this situation?
 - Are there public health considerations or biosecurity concerns, and if so, how will they be addressed? What about employee health and safety issues?
 - Are there anticipated adverse environmental effects resulting from some of the treatment actions being taken?
 - Do local laws, regulations or policies impact the way work will get accomplished?
5. How do I know if the actions being taken are accomplishing our objectives?
- What performance indicators will I use to determine progress?
 - What milestones (targets) need to be set? (This may include a projected timetable for the planned progression of events.)
6. What resources will I need to accomplish the objective?
- What equipment and supplies will I need?
 - What are the projected long-term personnel needs? (Including technical expertise currently not available)
- What other workforce requirements need to be met? (space, travel, other administrative issues)
 - How will I fund these activities?
7. What communication strategies/protocols/policies need to be followed to effectively communicate with different audiences?

Operational Planning (For a New Program or in a Non-Emergency situation)

The basics of operational planning in a non-emergency situation are the same as in an emergency. However, since there is more time, the operational plan can go into greater detail about program activity specifics. Things to be mindful of include:

- The intermediate program goals (as identified in the program logic model) should clearly link back to the Strategic program goal. It may be necessary to provide more detail about the links between the two levels.
- The operational plan must identify what should be done, by when, and by whom. Roles may need to be clearly explained, particularly if some program activities are to be carried out by outsiders (stakeholders or partners that are not part of the federal program).
- Performance metrics should be described, along with an explanation of how they reflect or support the intermediate goals. Details about the tracking system may need to be identified, as well as any concerns about the reliability or validity of the performance information or the process used to collect it.

- The resources needed to get the job done (budget, people, equipment, etc.) should be explained.
- If there are things the program can do to positively influence any external forces that may impact the program's success, the operational plan should outline these actions.

Note: Operational Planning in an Emergency Situation tends to be highly dynamic.

These plans will need to be revisited regularly (weekly, or maybe even daily) and changed accordingly.

Expect to develop a series of operational plans, particularly during the 3 stages of an Emergency:

Mobilization

Operations

Demobilization

Operational Plan Template

I. Overview of Emergency Situation

- A. Describe general problem:
- B. Status of current situation:
 - Resources already damaged
 - Additional resources potentially at risk (give empirical data, including economic data)
- C. Consequences of Taking No Action
 1. Best-Case Scenarios
 2. Worst Case Scenarios
- D. Describe Special Considerations like:
 - Volatility of situation (how dynamic is the situation?)
 - Political Issues that are significantly impacting the emergency
 - Biohazards or biosecurity threats
 - Environmental concerns
- E. Why were some options for addressing the emergency not considered feasible?
(These may link directly back up to the Special Considerations section)

- List Immediate Resources Needed: (personnel, equipment, supplies—medical and others)
- What performance indicators will you use to know if your actions are having the desired effect?
- What Immediate Communication Protocols/ Strategies need to be implemented and followed?

B. Intermediate Actions: (1 week -6 weeks):

1. List of Activities:
2. Conducted by Who:
3. Conducted by When:
4. Using what additional Resources:
5. Performance Targets (milestones) set and progress monitored

C. Long-Run Actions: (6+ weeks)

Same categories apply as above, however, it will not be possible to determine activities, etc. until the emergency evolves. Activities may change as new science or technology becomes available, or as some of the variables described under the “Special Considerations” section of the Overview get resolved.

II. Action Steps:

The Immediate and Intermediate Action Plans need to be sketched out rapidly.

- A. Immediate Actions (24 hours to 1 week)
 - What Activities Need to be Undertaken?
 - Who Needs to be Involved? (APHIS personnel, state agencies, industry, other cooperators?)
 - When Do Things Need to begin?

Activities or strategies for managing the emergency could change significantly from the Immediate and Intermediate Action Plans if the performance monitoring system indicates that progress is not being made at a pace deemed acceptable by emergency managers. This is why it is important to have an accurate, rigorous, and reliable performance monitoring system in place.

Note that over time, additional types of analytical expertise (economic, statistical, environmental, etc.) may be needed to improve the performance monitoring system being used.